

CCMA Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage to discuss dereliction and vacancy.

Thursday 14th June 2023

Chairperson, members of the committee, my name is Kieran Kehoe, Director of Services, Waterford City & County Council, and member of the City & County Management Association (CCMA) Committee on Housing, Building and Land Use. I am accompanied here today by Gordon Daly, Director of Services, Limerick City & County Council.

Firstly, on behalf of the CCMA, I would like to thank the committee for its invitation here today and look forward to assisting the committee in discussing dereliction and vacancy.

The CCMA welcomes the inclusion of addressing dereliction and vacancy under Housing for all, vacant homes action plan and town centre first and strongly endorses the introduction of policies/strategies such as Croi Conaithe, URDF call 3, CPO activation, repair and lease scheme, vacancy survey, and revisions to planning legislation (exemptions). There are Vacant home officer(s) and town Centre First teams/Regeneration officer(s) in place in most local authorities and recruitment is advanced in others.

The recent Census 2022 has shown a reduction in the number of vacant homes and apartments by 20,000 since 2016, and while this is welcomed, there is a real opportunity for the return of many more of these properties as we all try to address a housing supply shortage coupled with demands from the largest humanitarian crisis for generations.

My intention here today is to highlight the actions of our own Local Authorities Waterford City & County Council and Limerick City & County Council as demonstrators of work ongoing across the LA Sector.

Whole of Authority Approach

With the introduction of National policies and frameworks such as the National Planning Framework (NPF), Housing For All, Our Rural Future and Town Centre First, Local Authorities have now developed a strategic, whole of authority approach to dealing with dereliction and vacancy.

Heretofore derelict properties were typically dealt with as part of the work of one unit with varying degrees of success.

In line with the NPF's National Strategic Objectives around compact growth: which are

National Policy Objective 3a:

Deliver at least 40% of all new homes nationally, within the built-up footprint of existing settlements.

National Policy Objective 3b:

Deliver at least half (50%) of all new homes that are targeted in the five Cities and suburbs of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway, and Waterford, within their existing built-up footprints.

National Policy Objective 3c:

Deliver at least 30% of all new homes that are targeted in settlements other than the five Cities and their suburbs, within their existing built-up footprints.

National Policy Objective 16:

Target the reversal of rural decline in the core of small towns and villages through sustainable targeted measures that address vacant premises and deliver sustainable reuse and regeneration outcomes.

National Policy Objective 35:

Increase residential density in settlements, through a range of measures including reductions in vacancy, re-use of existing buildings, infill development schemes, area or site-based regeneration and increased building heights.

and utilising opportunities such as the roll-out of URDF and RRDF funding, Local Authorities now have strategic direction underpinned by funding to address dereliction and vacancy. As an example of this Waterford City & County Council (WCCC) was successfully awarded over €28M in funding under URDF Call 2 for specifically addressing derelict and vacant properties within the centre of Waterford City. The refurbishment and return to productive uses such as cultural, community, residential, and business uses demonstrate the real on the ground benefits of addressing dereliction and vacancy as these projects come to fruition. WCCC also received over €5M for Cappoquin under the RRDF and similarly this fund is successfully delivering regeneration projects to this rural town in West Waterford and part of this project includes the compulsory acquisition of derelict and vacant properties. These are just examples of the type of interventions which are being replicated across the LA sector.

In line with Pathway 4 of "Housing for All", Local Authorities are making increasing progress in addressing vacancy and dereliction using compulsory acquisition powers under the Derelict Site Act, 1990. In some instances, the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO)'s has had more mixed results to date with legal delays and challenges impeding progress in respect of some initiatives / local authorities. However, local authorities continue to use the CPO process and in particular to target more complex vacant properties where they have either been unable to identify the property owner or where owners refuse to cooperate in bringing the property back into active use. In addition some compulsory acquired properties are residential properties needing varying degrees of renovation to be brought back into use by new owners. The expansion of the Croí Conaithe (Towns) Fund Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant which increases the funding by €20,000 for both vacant and derelict buildings has been a particularly welcome development in this regard to help drive

homeowner interest in purchasing vacant and derelict properties. Local Authorities have indicated strong interest in this area and the recent changes appear to have stimulated increased activity.

To ensure that there is a strategic approach in place to address dereliction and vacancy, as referenced already, most LAs are now developing a “Whole of Authority” approach to this issue. In WCCC we have established a Steering committee headed up by me as Director of Service for planning and property management. Other members include Housing reps (Director of Services, Vacant Homes Officers, Head of Capital Delivery), Rural Development (Town Regeneration Officer), Planning (Senior Planner, SEP assigned solely to dereliction & vacancy), SEO Community and head of property management section.

This approach ensures that there is a consistent and targeted approach to addressing vacancy and dereliction as part of wider City, Town, and village regeneration projects. We have also developed a “Whole of Authority” information sheet which identifies the several types of grants and supports available to address derelict and vacant properties and we also provide a support service for those interested in availing of such supports. I have attached a copy of this in our submission documentation.

Vacancy and Dereliction has an impact on the commercial life of our rural towns and villages, and while we absolutely require more housing and a variety of options for the potential homeowners or renters, we cannot allow every property to be used for residential use. The viability of main streets in towns and villages requires some thought and is being addressed in the context of the Town Centre First Plans. There needs to be a connect between Dereliction /Vacancy and how local authorities through their business support units / LEO can help from a commercial business perspective . WCCC has successfully received over €1.4M for a Digital Transformation Hub in Dungarvan and in accordance with Town Centre First and indeed Digital First policies we have acquired 3 town centre derelict and vacant properties in which to house this new digital transformation hub.

To continue this level of positive intervention the CCMA welcomes the developments that have been made around Dereliction and Vacancy initiated by Central Government in terms of supports through URDF, RRDF, TVRS, grant assistance, funding of Town Centre First Plans and the creation of Vacant Homes Officer and Town Regeneration Officer positions. However, this area of work can be slow and is very resource intensive and with the volume of additional work in recent months increasing substantially for local authorities together with the impending announcements regarding URDF Call 3 there is a need for further resourcing of these efforts to ensure sustained momentum and early delivery of these positive outcomes.

Conclusion

To conclude, Chairman, and members of the committee, while the sector faces a range of challenges including the current market demands regarding supply of labour and materials and significantly increased construction costs, the CCMA is confident that there is considerable work underway by each local authority and its various stakeholders to achieve the targets in “Housing for All” for local authorities to acquire at least 2,500 vacant units by 2026 and present them to the market for sale.

To highlight this, I refer to the briefing note prepared by my colleague, Gordon Daly, that demonstrates how compulsory acquisition powers have been used by Limerick City and County Council to activate vacant property. Since 2019 the Council has published 250 notices to compulsorily acquire derelict and vacant buildings and to date has generated €7million in the sale of these properties to new owners to bring back into productive use. Limerick City & County Council are sectoral leaders on addressing dereliction and vacancy and are providing valuable experience to other LAs as they are at the earlier stages of their journey.

Thank you and we would welcome any questions you might have.

End of Opening Statement